Testimony of
Melodie Peters, President
AFT Connecticut, AFL-CIO

Public Safety and Security Committee
March 11, 2014

HB 5533 AN ACT CONCERNING WORKERS' COMPENSATION COVERAGE FOR PUBLIC EMPLOYEES WITH POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER

Good afternoon Senator Hartley, Representative Dargan and members of the Public Safety and Security Committee. My name is Melodie Peters and I am the President of AFT Connecticut, a diverse state federation of union of nearly 29,000 public and private sector employees including state employees, nurses, healthcare workers, teachers and other school personnel. I am here today to testify in favor of HB 5533 An Act Concerning Workers' Compensation Coverage for Public Employees with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

The world has changed a great deal since our workers' compensation statute was first enacted. Sadly, we live in a more violent society. Modern scientific research has shown that human beings, though they often can withstand and recover from the most debilitating of physical injuries, are often far more harmed by the emotional impact of the circumstances in which those physical injuries were sustained. We know now about post-traumatic stress disorder and that it can be a completely debilitating condition. When injuries occur in the workplace, whether they are physical, mental or emotional, we must provide parity of coverage and treatment in our workers' compensation statute.

AFT Connecticut is proud to represent the Newtown Federation of Teachers. On December 14th, 2012 it was our members at Sandy Hook Elementary School who experienced the most horrific workplace trauma than any of us could ever imagine. As most huddled quietly with small children hiding in classroom corners, closets and bathrooms, they heard the commotion and gunshots that killed their colleagues and 20 innocent, young students. After first responders arrived, teachers escorted their students out of the building through blood splattered hallways, past gruesome sights and into a chaotic scene of distraught families and emergency personnel.

Our members went to work on December 14th just like every other day in their careers. Those that survived will never be the same. They now carry the emotional scars and burdens from that event. They are nervous and anxious. They are worried about their safety. They have experienced survivor's guilt. They are worried about the well-being of their students and their families. They don't know if they can continue to teach and be responsible for the safety of an entire classroom ever again. Their world has turned upside down. They are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. And yet, they don't qualify for workers' compensation benefits.

To date, eleven teachers from Sandy Hook Elementary School have filed workers' compensation claims. They have all been denied because the current statute does not require workers' compensation to cover their injuries. They have paid out of pocket costs for treatment, and have had to use sick, personal or vacation time to seek that treatment. Had they been shot or suffered another kind of physical injury, their time and treatment would have been covered. They would have job protection and they wouldn't have to think about if they would be able to afford the care they need. Had HB 5533 been enacted last year, their situation would be completely different than it is today.

AFT Connecticut and other representatives of employees impacted by the Newtown massacre have been working with the bipartisan leaders of both chambers to create some kind of secondary fund to aid these workers as quickly as possible. We are grateful for these efforts, but it wouldn't be necessary if workers' compensation covered post-traumatic stress disorder. No worker should be at the mercy of the General Assembly for special treatment.

I implore you to not let the Sandy Hook shooting be in vain. If good can come from this tragedy, one of the most important things would be to recognize the importance of mental healthcare, both for those struggling with mental illness and for those who have been impacted by violent events during the course of their employment.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on this very important bill. I urge you to support HB 5533 and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank you.